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Talking Points on Lebanon for the DDCI
(31 October 1983)

Current Security Situation

The cease-fire in Lebanon continues to hold, but periodic violations are common. The most serious violations occur in Beirut's Shia southern suburbs, where Shia gunmen and the Lebanese Army clash almost every day.

- Government authority does not extend into these areas, which border the US Marine positions at the airport. In addition to the mainline Amal militia, several radical groups are operating in the southern slums. A few hundred PLO fighters, belonging to anti-Arafat factions, probably also returned to West Beirut during the fighting in September.
- Shia leader Nabih Barri has told US officials that he will try to control those groups operating in the Shia neighborhoods, who also snipe at Marine positions. Barri, however, often cannot move against these groups until after the fact. [redacted]

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The Lebanese Army will not attempt to sweep through the Shia suburbs for fear of setting off another round of serious fighting. The Army also remains concerned about its factional cohesion, and about six percent of its troops are currently on unauthorized absences.

- Many of the absent troops are Druze, who claim they will not rejoin the Army until a political settlement is reached.
- The Army, however, does retain a strong defensive position along the Alayh ridgeline overlooking Beirut. Its position at Suq al Gharb continues to receive intermittent shelling from nearby Druze positions, and Army units there have fended off several small probing attacks in the last two weeks. [redacted]

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National Reconciliation

The national reconciliation conference is expected to begin tonight in Geneva. There is little common ground among the conferees, and the talks are unlikely to produce a quick solution to the longstanding factional conflict.

- The position paper of the Syrian-backed National Salvation Front--led by Druze leader Walid Junblatt--calls for wide-ranging constitutional reforms and the abrogation of the Lebanese-Israeli troop withdrawal agreement as a precondition for any political

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settlement. Syrian Foreign Minister Khaddam, who is at the conference as the Syrian observer, will exert pressure on his Lebanese allies not to make any significant concessions.

- President Gemayel may try to postpone dealing with Lebanon's political problems by inducing the participants to join a government of national unity. Under such a scheme, Gemayel might increase the membership of the parliament and cabinet and appoint a prime minister acceptable to Syria and the Muslim and Druze opposition.
- Junblatt, Barri, and other opposition leaders will be reluctant to agree to a government of national unity unless they have assurances that Gemayel will carry out fundamental reforms. The opposition remains pessimistic that Christian hardliners in the Phalange and Lebanese Forces will allow Gemayel to make significant concessions. Opposition leaders will look to the US to persuade Gemayel to make concessions and to counteract hardline Christian pressure.

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The Beirut Bombings

The current death toll from the bombings on 23 October stands at 230 US and 56 French soldiers.

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We believe that two radical Lebanese Shia groups, the Husayni Suicide Forces and the Islamic Amal, combined to carry out the bombings at the US and French MNF compounds. These terrorist groups almost certainly had assistance from Iranian Revolutionary Guard units located in Baalabakk, a town in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley.

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Prospects for Lebanon

The talks on national reconciliation could drag on for several months. The talks, however, also could easily break down over domestic or foreign policy issues.

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- The various factions will be tempted to use violence to force concessions or forestall unpalatable political reforms.
- President Gemayel could become the target of an assassination attempt if Christian hardliners believe he is forsaking Christian interests. The bombings in Beirut last week have reminded all Lebanese politicians that they live under the constant threat of assassination.

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One likely casualty of the national reconciliation conference will be the Lebanese-Israeli withdrawal agreement. President Gemayel may be prepared to suspend the accord indefinitely in return for concessions by Syria and opposition forces on their demands for internal reform.

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If a government of national unity is formed, it could endure only by dealing with demands for fundamental political reforms.

- The participants at the conference, however, may agree to such a government only to buy time until the winter is over and they can resume military activity in the spring.

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NESA M#83-10282C

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